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All Bets on Gorbachev?

President Bush and Secretary of State James A. Baker III may be hedging their bets on Mikhail Gorbachev, but not nearly fast enough to satisfy Boris Yeltsin, the Soviet president's challenger.

Seeking faster action, Russian Republican President Yeltsin sent this verbal message to Baker through a trusted, high-level Baltic intermediary last week: "Tell the Americans I am very interested in creating and leading an independent Russia. I am very serious about it."

Even before that message, Baker had started quiet talks with aides about how to deal with the coming breakup of the Soviet Union. U.S. policy, until now focused solely on Gorbachev while ignoring dissident nationalities and politicians within the Kremlin's internal empire, may soon take into account conflicting needs and demands of the 14 republics. Many of them are seeking faster democratization and want U.S. help.

Two weeks before Yeltsin's appeal, Baker took a step away from concentration on Gorbachev with a totally unexpected statement in Paris. He said the United States would soon "touch base with the opposition" that had split away from "the center" during last month's Communist Party Congress in Moscow. The splitters include Yeltsin and the mayors of Moscow and Leningrad. Along with hundreds of other Communists, they handed in their cards, quit the party and now plan political and eco-

nomic change far outstripping Gorbachev's pace.

For Bush to disconnect from Gorbachev would profit Yeltsin's Russia (the largest Soviet republic), the Ukraine, Byelorussia and other republics—including the Baltic states, which do not recognize Soviet rule. U.S. technical assistance, now just beginning for Gorbachev's regime, could be better targeted to reward republics making the difficult transition from totalitarianism to democracy and from command to market economy.

This is precisely what Yeltsin had in mind in sending his message to Baker, according to those who brought it from Moscow: If you want to help Russia, help me!

How far Baker meant to go by suggesting base-touching "with the opposition" in his Paris statement is unclear. Backers of Yeltsin in Moscow noted that the secretary of state spoke out—possibly in anger—soon after Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze privately downgraded the American connection and adopted a new world view in which Germany overshadows the United States.

There are other signs of Baker's movement, however slow, toward seeing the events in the Soviet Union as offering a choice menu for American actions rather than a constricted regimen centered on Gorbachev and his inner circle. Telling aides that the past few days have been his "Baltic week," Baker not only saw foreign minis-

ters of both Estonia and Latvia but was drawn into heated dialogue that elevated the meetings into the first real give-and-take he has ever had with any Soviet opponent of Gorbachev.

A similar shift in attitude came in the Oval Office after Bush had sent final word to Riga two weeks ago that there was no chance he would have time to see Latvia's prime minister, Ivar Godmanis. But instead he saw him on Monday—and not for the scheduled 15 minutes but for almost three times that long. The president's change of mind sent Gorbachev a warning that what used to be off-limits to avoid embarrassing him has now become routine.

That profits Yeltsin, who was barred from the Oval Office on his visit here last year. Yeltsin has pledged to sign treaties with each of the Baltic states and to extend preferential pricing on oil and other commodities produced in Russia. He thus proposes a loose confederation, while Gorbachev is intent on preserving the Soviet Union.

Bush got an earful from the Latvian premier. Administration officials predict that will lead to the most important changes yet in diversifying the administration's Soviet policy: presidential approval of U.S. information centers in major Baltic cities, a subject intensely explored by the president during Monday's session. That could be a prelude to belated U.S. recognition of the broad and fascinating variety of political roads to be followed in the drama of an empire's end.

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